

A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



Common snapping turtle

Temperature Dependent

The common snapping turtle can't tuck its head and legs inside its shell in the presence of predators. Then again, there's probably no need.

When pestered, the snapper will extend its long neck, hiss loudly and strike. This is intimidating stuff, especially if you're hip to the end result – a vice-like grip the turtle is unlikely to surrender.

According to folklore, when the common snapping turtle bites, it won't let go until it thunders. Actually, there's no evidence of this, but you'll likely buy into anything – pray for a big thunder boomer – if you're the one with a snapper hanging from a crushed finger.

In North Dakota, the common snapping turtle is, well, common. Turtles can be found in most waters. A snapper is especially fond of muddy bottoms where it can bury itself up to its nostrils and eyes and ambush prey. This tactic works for fish, amphibians, small mammals and the occasional bird. The snapper, able to stay under water for two to three hours at a time, also feeds on invertebrates, aquatic plants and carrion.

Like other water turtles, scientists say, the snapper must eat most of its food underwater as the creature's fixed tongue makes it difficult to swallow out of water.

The common snapping turtle is one of the state's many nongame animals biologists fear isn't as abundant as it once was. Harvest for the turtle's meat, which is said to be tasty, especially in soups, is largely unregulated.

The snapper is North Dakota's largest turtle species. It can reach 30 inches in length, weigh more than 60 pounds, and live 30 years or more. It's brown or gray overall, but as the turtle ages, more and more green algae can be found growing on its back. The turtle also has a long tail and each webbed foot has five clawed toes.

The snapping turtle spends most of its time in water, but will travel some distance overland to find other sources of water during dry times. The female turtle digs a nest away from the water's edge where she'll deposit anywhere from 10-80 eggs. The eggs are left to hatch on their own, which can take about two months.

Interestingly, temperature during incubation determines the sex of the hatching turtles, scientists say. Cooler temperatures produce mainly males, while warmer temperatures produce mainly females.

And if it thunders during incubation, it's only a guess as to the results.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.